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ABSTRACT

Any discussion of the dimensions of contemporary political campaigning would not be complete without some consideration of heckling; for heckling, or the questioning of a speaker while he is in the act of speaking, has become a salient element on the political scene. In attempting to diminish the heckler's impact, the speaker usually appeals to one of two segments of the audience. He may direct his response to his supporters as the intended auditors, or he may respond in an attempt to effect change in the actions of the hecklers themselves. Counter techniques principally designed for his supporters' confirmation include such measures as ridiculing the antagonists, turning the tables on them, and using the hecklers as an example. Counter techniques mainly aimed at altering the hecklers' perceptions include preaching or scolding, teaching, disarming, defying, and counter threatening. The fitting response selected by the speaker must take into account the rhetorical situation. (WR)

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Heckling Techniques and Counter-techniques

by

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Any discussion of the dimensions of contemporary political campaigning would not be complete without some consideration of heckling; for heckling, or the questioning or jibing of a speaker while he is in the act of speaking, has become a salient element on the political hustings.

Understood as a rhetorical phenomenon, the heckling encounter can be explicated by utilizing Professor Lloyd Bitzer's conceptualization of the rhetorical situation. Bitzer writes, "Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence."[1] I would suggest that the heckling techniques such as the boo, the catcall, the shout, the chant, the waved placard, the thrown object, the walkout, etc. become the exigence,[2] or create the urgency to respond.[3] The speaker's rhetorical requirement becomes his ability to cope with the harassment by providing a "fitting response."[4] The depiction of those possible responses will provide the focus for this study.

In attempting to diminish the heckler's impact, the speaker usually appeals to one of two segments of the immediate audience. He may direct his response with his supporters (or the nonhecklers) as the intended auditors, or he may respond in the attempt to effect change in the actions of the hecklers themselves. Counter-techniques principally designed for his supporters' confirmation include such measures as ridiculing the antagonists, turning the tables on them, and using the hecklers as an example. Counter-techniques mainly aimed at altering the hecklers' perceptions include preaching or scolding,

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teaching, disarming, defying, and counter-threatening.[5] It should be noted that all of the categories and directions of appeal suggested here are neither exhaustive nor firm. My purpose is to introduce a means of viewing the heckling encounter, and the presentation will function as that starting point.

Ridicule, or the unflattering depiction of the heckler, represents one counter-technique in which the speaker can affirm the support of the nonhecklers. Professor Robert Heath's discussion of scapegoating in relation to dialectical confrontation serves to underline the significance of ridicule. According to Heath, "The use of a scapegoat exemplifies the tactics of division and identification. Individuals separate themselves from their enemies. Then, they heap all of the social inequities upon these enemies, and finally they symbolically kill them."[6] When George Wallace encountered a long-haired heckler who was attempting to interrupt his discourse, he replied, "'You need a haircut. I thought you had a barbers' strike here for a moment.'"[7] Heckled by anti-war advocates, Hubert Humphrey said, "'Take a look at them . . . They're filled with hate and bitterness. Basically, they're cowards.'"[8] Thus, the counter-technique of ridicule, as a means of reinforcing support, serves to differentiate the antagonists from the others in the audience by pointing out real or imagined divergent characteristics.

A second counter-technique principally designed to rally the speaker's adherents is turning the tables. Professors Carroll Arnold, Douglas Ehninger and John Gerber suggest that turning the tables involves the acceptance of an opponent's premise, but the drawing of a different conclusion.[9]

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After a number of the audience had staged a walkout, Hubert Humphrey responded: "'We were just testing the exits on both ends of the gym, and they work.'"[10] A mass walkout at a George Wallace appearance prompted this Wallace comment: "There go the free speech boys . . .'"[11] Thus, for the implementation of this counter-technique, the heckler's action is acknowledged, but the speaker uses it to his own advantage.

A third counter-technique to be employed with the speaker's followers in mind is the use of the heckler as an example. The hecklers become, in Kenneth Burke's terms, a "material reference," for an issue that awaits development. Facing sustained heckling, George Wallace contended: "'You folks are getting a good lesson in what I've been talking about. We're not talking about race, we're talking about anarchy.'"[13] According to newsman R.W. Apple, Jr., Hubert Humphrey's "final word to the pro-Humphrey majority in the crowd was an appeal to vote against 'the bitterness and nihilism and animosity' represented by the demonstrators."[14] In short, the hecklers serve as visual aids for the speaker, enhancing the possibility that the supporters will get the message.

One method the speaker has available to him in the attempt to persuade the hecklers themselves is through preaching or scolding them. This counter-technique usually takes the form of a denunciation of the behavior of the protesters. At one point, Edmund Muskie admonished a heckler by saying: "'You can only learn by listening.'"[15] Hubert Humphrey on at least one occasion countered his hecklers with this statement: ". . . it (the achievement of peace) will not be done by demonstrations; it will not be done by placards. I would remind the audience what the Scriptures say: Blessed are the peace-makers, not the talkers, not the walkers, not the paraders."[16] Confronting the hecklers, though, is the dilemma that if they take the speaker's advice

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and become more civil, then they face the possibility of having their message co-opted. As Professors Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith suggest, "A rhetorical theory suitable to our age must take into account the charge that civility and decorum serve as masks for the preservation of injustice, that they condemn the dispossessed to non-being, and that as transmitted in a technological society they become the instrumentalities of power for those who 'have.'"[17]

The teaching counter-technique represents a second alternative for the speaker in attempting to assuage the heckler. In this case, competence is detailed by the speaker as it relates to his opponent's concern. When the hecklers waved placards declaring "'Wallace for Fuehrer,'" he said, "'I was fighting Nazis before you people were born. I'm a disabled American war veteran.'"[18] When some hecklers had walked out on him, Hubert Humphrey noted: "'This is amazing.' The last time anybody walked out on me was in 1948 when I pleaded for civil rights at the Democratic Convention.'"[19] Thus, the antagonism seems to be unnecessary or even counter-productive.

Another counter-technique created principally for "the heckler's benefit" is the disarming attempt. There are several varieties. The rhetorical question is one approach. After hecklers had booed his reference to intellectual morons, George Wallace countered with: "'I don't know whether you're booing me or the intellectual morons.'"[20] Agreement or co-operation with the antagonists is another possibility. In order to blunt the attack of a group of hecklers, Edmund Muskie invited one of their number to come to the podium and speak.[21] Utilizing another approach, the plea for sympathy or a personal appeal, George Wallace said: "'When you interrupt me it's hard to keep my train of thought . . . Man, this is tough.'"[22] Finally, by taking the

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heckler's taunt at face value, the speaker will be employing a form of the disarming counter-technique. Upon hearing a shout of "'sieg heil," Wallace returned the following: ". . . glad to see you Nazis here tonight."[23] In short, the disarming counter-technique catches the heckler off guard. If he persists with the technique which is countered with a disarming technique, then it will only decrease his effectiveness.

A fourth counter-technique directed at the heckler is that of defiance. Of this there are two forms: the overt and the covert. Overt defiance is employed frequently after the throwing of objects or following much vocal antagonism. The speaker attempts to demonstrate that he has not been persuaded by such activity. Hubert Humphrey exemplified this counter-technique when he declared: "I want it said then of Hubert Humphrey that in an important and tough moment of his life he stood by what he believed, and he was not shouted down."[24] The covert approach, on the other hand, would consist of ignoring the heckler. This counter-technique is probably less suitable for the instances in which the overt form is utilized; for, after all, it becomes difficult to ignore a well thrown missile, but it can serve a most damaging function. Dr. Kim Giffin attests to the effectiveness of this approach when he writes: "The initiation of any communicative event carries with it an implied request: 'Please validate me.'"[25] Thus, by ignoring the heckler, the crucial recognition is negated.

Finally, the speaker has at his disposal the counter-threat, or the attempt to reply in kind to the heckler. Newsman Paul Valentine's description of how one politician chose to use this counter-technique is perhaps the most vivid example: "His supporters cheered Wallace when he repeated his standard vow that if 'anarchists' lie down in front of his car, 'it will be the last time they'll want to do it.'

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"Then he added, glaring at the hecklers, and if you don't believe me, you just try me when I come back here as President of this country."[26] Thus, the counter-threat, complete with its menacing nature, may be the least aesthetic of the available counter-techniques, but it has the advantage of making clear the intentions of the speaker.

In conclusion, with this presentation I have attempted to view the heckling encounter rhetorically. I have suggested that the heckled speaker not only has the option of selecting a counter-technique in minimizing the effectiveness of the harassment, but also he should be aware of the segment of the immediate audience for which his response will have maximum utility. In short, the fitting response must take into account the rhetorical situation. I trust that I have generated some insight into this dimension of contemporary political campaigning, and I anticipate that we will pursue this subject at greater length because of its significance as a rhetorical phenomenon.

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Notes

[1]Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 (January 1968), rpt. in Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric: Selected Readings, ed. Richard L. Johannesen (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 386.

[2]According to Bitzer, "Any exigence is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done . . . An exigence is rhetorical when it is capable of positive modification and when positive modification requires discourse or can be assisted by discourse." See Bitzer, pp. 386-387.

[3]This is applicable, then, when it is the heckler's intention to invite a response or when the speaker is able to construe the heckler's action as constituting such an intent. For example, by hurling an object toward the speaker, the heckler may be attempting to disrupt the gathering, but the speaker may avoid the consequences by countering with a remark of defiance. When the heckler's intention is acknowledged as a desire for disruption, however, the action no longer becomes rhetorical for him. Bitzer writes, ". . . a rhetorical audience consists only of those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change." See Bitzer, p. 387.

[4]See Bitzer, p. 389.

[5]I extend my appreciation to Dr. A. Jackson McCormack, department of speech communication, The Pennsylvania State University, for his assistance in creating some of the categories.

[6]Robert L. Heath, "Dialectical Confrontation: A Strategy of Black Radicalism," The Central States Speech Journal, 24 (Fall 1973), 176.

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[7]Quoted in "Wallace Denounces Rivals On 'Anarchy,'" The New York Times, 14 September 1968, p. 16, col. 2.

[8]Quoted in Russell Freeburg, "Boston Hippies Shout Down Hubert, Ted," The Chicago Tribune, 20 September 1968, p. 1, col. 2.

[9]See Carroll C. Arnold, Douglas Ehninger, and John Gerber, eds., The Speaker's Resource Book, rev. ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1966), p. 320.

[10]Quoted in "Soul Brother Humphrey," Time, 10 May 1968, p. 28.

[11]Quoted in "Wallace on the Rise," Newsweek, 22 July 1968, p. 22.

[12]See Andrew A. King and Floyd Douglas Anderson, "Nixon, Agnew, and the 'Silent Majority,': A Case Study in the Rhetoric of Polarization," Western Speech, 35 (Fall 1971), p. 253 esp., for a discussion of the concept of material reference as it pertains to the heckling situation.

[13]Quoted in Max Frankel, "Wallace in the North: Friends and 'Anarchist' Critics Cheer and Scream," The New York Times, 27 July 1968, p. 10, col. , 6.

[14]R.W. Apple, Jr., "Humphrey, in Ohio, Sees Hope Despite Dim Outlook," The New York Times, 23 September 1968, p. 30, col. 5.

[15]Quoted in Warren Weaver, Jr., "Muskie Heckled on Syracuse Campus," The New York Times, 8 October 1968, p. 34, col. 3.

[16]This is an excerpt from an audio tape furnished to me by John H. O'Leary of the Democratic National Committee. This segment is from a September 12, 1968 address by Humphrey in Flint, Michigan.

[17]Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith, "The Rhetoric of Confrontation," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 55 (February 1969), 8.

[18]Quoted in Aldo Beckman, "Wallace Faces Friend and Foe in Boston," The Chicago Tribune, 9 October 1968, p. 12, col. 6.

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[19]Quoted in "HHH--Hop, Hum, Heal," Newsweek, 13 May 1968, p. 32.

[20]Quoted in Walter Rugaber, "Princeton Meets A Cool Wallace," The New York Times, 12 May 1967, p. 29, col 1.

[21]This is documented in an audio tape furnished to me by John H. O'Leary of the Democratic National Committee. This particular segment is from a September 25, 1968 address by Muskie in Washington, Pennsylvania.

[22]Quoted in Jules Witcover, "A Preview of Wallace's Appeal to the North," The New Republic, 27 May 1967, p. 10.

[23]Quoted in Walter Rugaber, "Princeton Meets a Cool Wallace," The New York Times, 12 May 1967, p. 29, col. 1.

[24]This is from an audio tape furnished to me by John H. O'Leary of the Democratic National Committee. Humphrey made this statement during a September 19, 1968 speech in Boston.

[25]Kim Giffin, "Social Alienation by Communication Denial," The Quarterly Journal of Speech, 56 (December 1970), 351.

[26]Paul W. Valentine, "Foes Taunt Wallace, Surround His Hotel," The Washington Post, 2 October 1968, p. A2, cols. 1, 2.

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